

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Anonymity and Signature as a Productive Practice: Ingeborg Bachmann and Jacques Derrida Sayaka Oki

Introduction

Ingeborg Bachmann is an Austrian author whose last novel *Malina* was published in 1971.¹ She began working on *Malina* in 1966-7, and the novel forms part of the trilogy 'Ways of death'. *Malina* is a complex novel. The story is set in Vienna and presents three protagonists: the first-person narrator who is an anonymous woman, her lover Ivan and her doppelganger and male alter-ego Malina. Remarkably, the female narrator does not reveal her name until the end of the novel, whereas the male figures Ivan and Malina are referred to by their names throughout the story. Therefore, the question arises: why does the narrator remain anonymous?

In the feminist research on Bachmann's work, the anonymity of the female narrator in *Malina* is predominantly interpreted as a difficulty of building female subjectivity within a patriarchal society.² The novel describes the patriarchal society after the World War Two, where the image of the victimised daughters persists. The memories of the victim appear in the nightmares of the narrator, and the abused daughters are compared with the Jews.³ The female narrator as the embodiment of femininity suffers from these traumata of the war. Some feminist interpreters of Bachmann's *Malina* regard the female narrator as hysteric.⁴ Hysteria is examined in psychology as a typically women's disease, disorganisation of language being one of its symptoms when a woman cannot build her own identity because of deficiency in language. Viewed as a patient, the female narrator suffers from traumata that originate in the gender-related power structure and in the memories of the World War. She talks about her traumata to the male character Malina, who accords with the symbolic order. The female anonymity represents here an imaginary 'other' who has lost her identity because the symbolic order refers to an established subject and femininity has no representation in the symbolic.

Hence, on the one hand, anonymity can be viewed as an example of the lost subjectivity, in contrast to the dominance of the social-symbolic reality; yet, on the other hand, as this article argues, anonymity also represents a poetic practice. In other words, it rejects the violence of naming, which is described by Derrida's theory as the violence of arche-writing.

The novel *Malina* is constructed in a complex way: the female narrator has certain hysteric symptoms, but along with that she appears as an author who is planning to write a book. While writing letters she formulates her ideas, in the end

¹ Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina: A Novel* translated by Philip Boehm (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990) 65f. Quotes from the novel *Malina* are taken from this translation, and subsequent references appear as page numbers in the text. Quotes from the other works of Bachmann appear in my own translation.

² See Katja Kauer, 'The mystique of a Feminine aesthetic', Bologna (Italy), 2000 <http://www.women.it/cybrararchive/files/kauer.htm>

³ Kauer.

⁴ Inge Röhnelt, *Hysterie und Mimesis in 'Malina'* (Frankfurt a. M.: P. Lang, 1990).

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establishing a unique form of writing with two specific features: her letters are anonymous and bear a conspicuous signature. To make it clear: the narrator is nameless and signs herself 'An unknown woman'. It is obvious that she gives up her name in order to avoid the violence of arche-writing and that in her project of writing letters her anonymity is connected with the signature. This article examines namelessness as a literary device and analyses the issue of anonymity and signature in the light of Derrida's theory.

Writing and Absence of the Subject

Jacques Derrida's concept of *pharmakon* shows that his writing contains binary oppositions such as speech/writing, life/death, father/son, master/servant, first/second, soul/body, inside/outside, good/evil, seriousness/play, day/night, sun/moon etc.⁵ He attempts to overcome such a hierarchy by investigating whether one value also includes elements of another – inferior – value, and vice versa. For instance, in *Plato's Pharmacy* Derrida deconstructs the metaphysical structure of the hierarchy, in which writing proves to be similar to the *pharmakon*, which has two different effects: it can cure the disease but it can also make the illness worse. At the same time, the ambivalent meaning of the words *medicine* and/or *poison* has its origin in the old Greek rite of the *pharmakos*.

In Athens the *pharmakos* ceremony was held for cleansing after a misfortune or a disaster. *Pharmakos* relates to a sacrifice or, to be more precise, to a scapegoat, an uncontrollable evil which has to be banished from the city.⁶

The (rite of the) *pharmakos* was a purification of this sort of old. If a calamity overtook the city by the wrath of God, whether it were famine or pestilence or any other mischief, they led forth as though to a sacrifice the most unsightly of them all as a purification and a remedy to the suffering city.⁷

This practice was carried out in particular in Athens during the Thargelia festival up to the fifth century. Two men, one representing men and the other women, were selected as *pharmakos*. Since the evil or a disaster had originated from outside the Agora, the sacrifice in this rite was sent from the inside of the city to the outside. The sacrifice embodied the ambivalence: on the one hand, the evil (poison) itself, which should have been exiled from the city, since it was believed to have brought misfortune to the city, and, on the other hand, the remedy to treat the city's ailment. This ambivalence of *pharmakos*, where the sacrifice was viewed as a cause of the misfortune and at the same time as a healing medicine, is discussed in Derrida's concept of writing.

Writing implies violence: it slips out of control of the writer in contrast to speech, 'logos'. Oral speech, 'logos', appears trustworthy because it is produced directly by the speaker and its meaning can be explained by the speaker, who is the

⁵ Derrida describes a binary opposition as never 'the confrontation of two terms' but always connected with power producing 'a hierarchy and the order of a subordination' in it. See Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 21.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 130.

⁷ Derrida, *Dissemination* 133.

‘subject’ and who guarantees the effectiveness and lucidity of communication. Therefore, oral messages reach the recipient exactly as the subject has intended. In contrast, writing produces a distance in space and time between its subject (author) and its object (text); when the message reaches the recipient, the subject is not present. But writing without a telos – a destination – is ‘errant’.⁸ Thus, in writing, the authority of the subject is being destroyed because the subject is the one who produces a statement. As soon as the utterance is put in written words, it ‘kills’ its producer – its subject.

Derrida described features of writing with words like ‘liquid’⁹ and ‘bastard’¹⁰ because in the absence of the subject writing can flow from one reader to another like a liquid and, therefore, the identity of writing is not clear, not singular. The violence of writing is in focus of Derrida’s work right at the beginning, for example in the scene in *Phaedrus*: the leaves of writing attract Socrates, who never wanted to leave the city and who nevertheless travelled to the countryside near the river Ilissus. Socrates, a non-writing philosopher, symbolises interiority, whereas outside the city he is called ‘a foreigner’.¹¹ Socrates discards his own principle of living inside the city because the leaves of writing happened to arouse his interest. The poisonous effect of pharmakos becomes obvious: it is based on ‘the going or leading astray’,¹² on the subject getting lost.

The Violence of Arche-Writing and Proper Names

Since the violence of writing would ‘kill’ the subject or the intention of the subject, writing generates its meaning in the absence of the subject. This violent aspect of writing – the violence of arche-writing – can already be observed at the moment when an infant is given its name. Naming was one of the very first human activities, which appeared as a means to distinguish one person from another. Due to the absence of a subject, writing meanders and leads the reader away from the writer’s intention; this property of writing is manifested in the violence of naming and is defined as arche-writing. A name differentiates one person from others and gives him or her an identity but does not function as the identification of the whole personality because that cannot be expressed in one single word. Although it is true that socially a name functions as an identifying trait of a person, it fails to describe the person’s uniqueness. The name aims to capture the personality in a description that can be seen as a violent aspect of writing. The anonymity of the female narrator in *Malina* can be interpreted in this context as a productive practice to avoid the violence of proper names. The narrator is a woman and she recognises the violent source of arche-writing, so her intention to stay anonymous can be interpreted as a female strategy to overcome violence.

In one of his main works – *Of Grammatology* – Derrida gives an example of arche-violence analysing Lévi-Strauss’ anthropological investigation of the case of the Nambikwara, an indigenous people of the Brazilian Amazon (*Tristes Tropiques*).

⁸ Derrida, *Dissemination* 143.

⁹ Derrida, *Dissemination* 152.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Dissemination* 148.

¹¹ Derrida, *Dissemination* 70.

¹² Derrida, *Dissemination* 71.

The Nambikwara people are strictly prohibited from using proper names. Although each of the Nambikwara is given a proper name at birth, in practice these names are not used in their group. Instead, people address each other either using Portuguese names or sobriquets. The social system has been retained here since the Nambikwara use oral communication and do not have the knowledge of writing. When Lévi-Strauss arrived at the village of the Nambikwara, he witnessed a fight between two girls. One of them then approached the ethnologist and whispered to him the proper name of her adversary in order to take revenge.

Lévi-Strauss recognised the source of violence when the ethnologist, that is himself, had interfered with their law, which stipulates the concealment of the proper name;

but it is the anthropological eruption which breaks the secret of the proper names and the innocent complicity governing the play of young girls. It is the anthropologist who violates a virginal space so accurately connoted by the scene of a game and a game played by little girls.¹³

Since the anthropologist introduced the alphabet into the society of the Nambikwara, the anthropologist can be equated with the function of writing. The chief of the tribe learned about communication through writing first when the anthropologist came on a visit to his village. As the people of Nambikwara had not acknowledged or had avoided writing, they reckoned his activity of learning the alphabet as a betrayal of their law and expelled the chief of the tribe from the group. If writing is understood as a crisis coming from the outside and the primary oral culture of the Nambikwara represents an innocent world, then Lévi-Strauss' concept is based on a binary opposition: he judged the cultural traditions of the Nambikwara related to speech and the 'do not know how to write' as 'good',¹⁴ and categorised writing, which shows a discord, as bad.

Derrida criticised this binarism.¹⁵ He insisted that naming already comprises violence. The arche-violence occurs since naming categorises a person within a social system or within a class. Therefore, the name eliminates the intrinsic value of a person. Derrida defined the name and the practice of naming as arche-writing because the first act of a human is to give the name to the newly born child and that means that the name of the infant is for the first time registered within the social system.

There was in fact a first violence to be named. To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the original violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the unique *within* the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 113.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 116.

¹⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 135.

dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance.¹⁶

The violence of writing starts from the moment of naming. The violence of arche-writing strips the named person of the personality and of the uniqueness.

Anonymity of the Female Narrator

Bachmann's novel *Malina* deals with this problem of the proper name. The main character in the novel, the female narrator, does not refer to her proper name until the end of the novel, so in all scenes she remains anonymous. She lives with her male partner and her doppelgänger Malina in Vienna and appears to be a well-known author. In the first chapter 'Happy with Ivan', the female narrator is writing a novel – referred to as 'a beautiful book' – for her lover Ivan. However, the question arises of why she conceals her name. From the feminist perspective this anonymity indicates that, in contrast to the male characters, the female protagonist does not have her own independent position within the patriarchal society depicted in the novel. The protagonist is constantly substituted by the position of the 'other', who is subjected to the symbolic order.¹⁷ Hence, the anonymity can be read, on the one hand, as a manifestation of the lost subjectivity of a woman in contrast to the symbolic order. For this reason, naming and anonymity symbolise the gender-dominated balance of power between men and women. The feminist study by Inge Röhnelt published in 1990 regarded the female narrator in *Malina* as a hysteric, particularly due to her deficiency in the coherent articulation and thought, which can be analysed in the psychological context.¹⁸ The vulnerable female narrator struggles in her specific hysteric way with the problem of identity.

On the other hand, the female anonymity provides a poetic dimension related to the rejection of the proper name. This article interprets the phenomenon of rejecting the name as a productive practice: being an author herself, the female protagonist is aware of the arche-violence of writing and avoids placing herself into a social classification, in particular when she communicates with others. In her novel, Bachmann depicts a paradoxical poetic character that can be interpreted both as a hysteric and as a writer.

The last scene of the novel describes how the female narrator disappears into the wall and only Malina, the doppelgänger of the female narrator, stays in the room. The novel ends with the words 'It was murder' (225). This last scene can be interpreted as follows: in order to regain her subject, the nameless narrator as the embodiment of the femininity joins the symbolic order of her doppelgänger Malina. Obviously, this movement into the symbolic order is related to power. So even if the balance of power between the symbolic order and the femininity becomes evident at the end of the novel, the refusal to take a name can be interpreted the following way:

¹⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 112.

¹⁷ Maria Behre, "Das Ich, weiblich: „Malina“, im Chor der Stimmen zur 'Erfindung' des Weiblichen im Menschen". *Ingeborg Bachmanns „Malina“*, ed. Andrea Stoll (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1992) 210f.

¹⁸ Röhnelt.

the main character wants to reject violence. Derrida calls it 'the battle of proper names', which has a destructive power.

The avoidance of the proper name can be discussed in more detail referring to Bachmann's fourth lecture at the University of Frankfurt known as *Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (1959-60), entitled *Der Umgang mit Namen*. In this lecture Bachmann acknowledged that names of characters and places that appear in fiction and names of people in real life should be distinguished in terms of how important it is to understand and sense both a person and an object. In literature, the connection between name and identity is closer. Plots unfold not only through characters, but also through places and locations: without these descriptions, whether fictive or not, a written text does not appear as a poetic space because in literature a unique poetic map is created through names, i.e. proper names. Fictitious characters demonstrate a close connection to their names. Bachmann argues that we as readers habitually recognise characters by their names and follow twists of the plot with the help of names, so we think we know the characters already from knowing their names.¹⁹ However, Bachmann pointed out another aspect – the despair of naming – using the example of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Since a proper name does not describe the whole identity and the uniqueness of a person, the names of characters in the novel are being constantly changed or varied. Instead of attaching a single proper name to a particular character, the uniqueness of a particular character ought to be constituted newly in every scene in which the character appears. For this reason the author refuses to give him or her only one proper name,

because we are not supposed to recognize the characters from their names. The names are supposed to act like a trap. But rather, we shall recognize them through a totally different thing. ... More important than paying attention to names is to be mindful of the contexts in which the names are mentioned. This could be in the context of a flower, a honeysuckle, a sold grassland, a marriage announcement. We suddenly discover that we gain ground only in such a way. Otherwise, people are hidden from us forever. And they want to hide because there is a reason, a mystery, which frightens away the names.²⁰

Bachmann's female main character in *Malina* proves that the name in literature is not the only possibility to describe the uniqueness of a person. At first, the protagonist is nameless; however, depending on various contexts, her identity becomes more 'fluid'. Depending on the scene, she symbolises either a part of her doppelgänger Malina or that of her lover Ivan.²¹ Similarly, the female narrator is hidden behind the mask of the princess in the legend *The Mysteries of the Princess of Kagran* inserted into the novel *Malina*.²²

¹⁹ Ingeborg Bachmann, 'Der Umgang mit Namen', in: *Ingeborg Bachmann Werke*, Hg. von Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum und Clemens Münster, 4Bd. (Munich: Piper, 1978) 247.

²⁰ Bachmann, 'Er Umgang' 252.

²¹ Marion Schmaus, *Die poetische Konstruktion des Selbst. Grenzgänge zwischen Frühromantik und Moderne: Novalis, Bachmann, Christa Wolf, Foucault* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000) 118.

²² Schmaus 162.

The violence of naming is also dealt with in a passage in which the female narrator wants to write a letter to 'Herr Ganz':

What then began to bother me, and continues to bother me, is your name. Today I have to make an effort to write down your name once again, and hearing it from others immediately gives me a headache. When I cannot avoid thinking about you I purposely think of you as 'Herr Genz' or 'Herr Gans', there have been times when I've tried 'Ginz' but the best escape still remains 'Herr Gonz' because it's not too far removed from your real name but can, with a little Viennese coloring, make it just a little silly. (65-6)

She is unable to articulate his name and frequently changes the vowels and the consonants – 'Ganz', 'Genz', 'Gans', 'Ginz' and 'Gonz' – which marks the dissolution of the definitive meaning or of the name itself. The narrator repetitively uses various forms of address such as 'Herr Schöhnthal', 'Herr Ganz', 'Herr Hartleben' or 'Lily' because the letters are written over many times. Noteworthy, in the end they are not sent to the intended recipients. The repetition of the signature is substantial since a sign or a mark is able to create several contexts. Derrida considered this function of a mark, especially that of a signature, to be the fundamental effect of writing.

Another letter in *Malina* deals with the difficulty of writing a name. The following quote shows that addressing a letter and inserting a particular name implies a moment of violence and that a signature functions as a repetitive mark.

Dear Sir:

I could never pronounce your first name. You have often reproached me for this. But that is not the reason why the thought of a meeting is unpleasant for me. Back then I could have spared myself this name, because the occasion so permitted, I couldn't bring myself to do this and I discovered that this inability to pronounce certain names or even to suffer excessively because of them does not stem from the names themselves but has to do with the initial, original mistrust of a person, unjustified in the beginning, but eventually, one day, always justified. ... I was once acquainted with Herr Ganz. My only request is that you at least trouble yourself to use the same courtesy.

Vienna, ...

Sincerely,
An unknown woman (66-7)

The rejection of naming which appears as a blank 'Dear Sir...' suggests that the uniqueness of the subject cannot be expressed only through one single name without a context. In the protagonist's perception, the name 'Ganz' is connected with the distrust of that person. For this reason she is not able to utter his name.

Repeating of the Signature 'An Unknown Woman' and the Meaning of Contexts

As the above quotation shows, the first-person narrator signs herself 'An unknown woman'. This unique way of signing demonstrates that her anonymity turns into a

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specific sign. In my view, the narrator rejects the violence of arche-writing by avoiding the proper name, because being a well-known author she has a certain sensitivity to the violence of arche-writing, which according to Derrida begins with naming – in other words, with registering the subject within the social hierarchy. This specific form of signature in the letter is highly significant since it allows the narrator to identify herself as anonymous. This signature appears in all other letters, so every time it is put in a variety of new contexts. Recalling Bachmann's theoretical work and particularly her lecture 'Der Umgang mit Namen' at the University of Frankfurt, the varied contexts in which the subject appears are more important than the definitive meaning of a proper name in the literary work because new contexts generate new meanings of a word. The signature 'An unknown woman' appears every time in a new context – in new letters – and thus produces many different meanings.

Derrida emphasised that in comparison with the spoken language a written sign produces several meanings, for example when signing letters or other documents, because writing is based on the actual or on the empirical non-presence of the writing subject, that is of the signer.²³ The signature is removed through the possibility of repetition or, in Derrida's words, through 'iterability',²⁴ in other contexts or in different situations. For example, even though the same signature can be used for different purposes, e.g. in different letters, each letter contains a different message and context, but the signature is nevertheless set every time alike. If the signature possesses a code, which implies 'iterability', it can be used in many different circumstances.

Effects of signature are the most common thing in the world. But the condition of possibility of those effects is simultaneously, once again, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity. In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production.²⁵

Derrida's thinking attempts to overcome the opposition of metaphysical concepts that always appear in terms of subordination, which shows the balance of power.

The female narrator in the novel *Malina* develops her own strategy to overcome the violence of arche-writing by staying anonymous: her original signature 'An unknown woman' is repeated in different letters, so that it functions as an iterable mark that generates its meanings autonomously, especially given the absence of the subject. Thus the absence of the subject is emphasised through the unique expression 'An unknown woman'. The letters in *Malina* are mostly torn up and almost never sent. In *Malina*, the female narrator remains anonymous both when she is writing letters and when she is speaking on the phone to her lover Ivan. Hence, only her voice makes it clear who is calling. Instead of guaranteeing one definitive meaning of the proper name, which can produce a power relation, the female narrator attempts to

²³ Derrida, *Limited Inc* 20.

²⁴ Derrida, *Limited Inc* 11.

²⁵ Derrida, *Limited Inc* 20.

describe her personality in many different contexts using her own signature. For this purpose, the potential of iterability or repeating is of special importance.

Conclusion

Derrida's deconstructive view on writing attempts to overcome the binary oppositions connected to power. In this context, writing is regarded as a *pharmakon*, which symbolises not a single value but two ambivalent values at the same time: medicine and/or poison. The poisonous effect of writing becomes evident as soon as writing gets apart from the intention of the subject after it has been put on paper. The authority of the subject is thereby 'killed' since the writing does not belong to the subject anymore. Hence writing is based on the absence of the subject.

This violent moment first appears as *arche-violence* of naming because a proper name cannot describe the uniqueness of the person, that is of the subject, but rather registers the person within a social hierarchy. Bachmann's novel *Malina* brings up this problem of the proper name: the female narrator does not use her proper name; moreover, she stays anonymous. This article has interpreted the anonymity of the female narrator as a productive practice since she as a well-known author acknowledges the meaning of *arche-violence* in naming and therefore attempts to avoid giving a definitive meaning with the proper name.

However, the concept of anonymity in this literary project is not the only way to overcome the power related to the proper name. The project is expanded generating different meanings by putting a sign or a mark in varied contexts. According to Bachmann's theoretical work 'Der Umgang mit Namen', the contexts are more important than the proper name of the character, because the contexts produce new literary meanings beyond a definitive meaning. The novel *Malina* reflects this concept in relation to the expression of the female narrator. Writing letters, the female narrator uses her unique signature, 'An unknown woman', which is repeated in every letter, that is, in a new context every time. In this respect, Derrida's definition of 'iterability' becomes important here, because the positive function of the proper name can be found in repetition that is achieved with a signature. If a signer repeats his or her signature, this sign generates several new contexts that reflect the plurality of meanings. To summarise, the anonymity of the female narrator is interpreted in this article as having the potential to overcome the power-related hierarchy in the socio-symbolic reality in the novel. The letters written by the anonymous narrator demonstrate the function of the literary way of generating meanings by using a signature.